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SUBJECT: Vietnam Starts to Organize Oil Pollution Policy

REF: (A) HO CHI MINH CITY 384 (B) 4/26/07 Whittington-Waller e-mail

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. Government of Vietnam (GVN) environmental officials say that the GVN has begun to better coordinate its response to oil pollution that plagued the nation's coastlines in the first half of 2007. The Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment (MONRE) now chairs an inter-agency oil pollution working group tasked with analyzing prior pollution incidents, responding to future spills, and seeking foreign assistance. Previous GVN efforts in this area were unfocused and led to scattershot requests for assistance from many GVN agencies. Though the GVN believes the spilled oil originated in Southeast Asia or China, it has been unable to precisely determine the source of the pollution. End Summary.

MONRE IN CHARGE  
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¶2. (SBU) On August 28, MONRE Director General Tran Thi Minh Ha told ESTHoff that in April the GVN created an inter-agency pollution working group to respond to a series of marine oil pollution incidents. The Director General of the Agency of Environmental Protection (VEPA) heads the group, which meets monthly, and also includes director general-level representation from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Justice, Agriculture and Rural Development, Defense, Transportation, along with the Office of Government and the National Committee for Search and Rescue (VINARSACOM). Previously, VINARSACOM had led the Vietnamese efforts in this area and the GVN's decision to task MONRE was part of a broader GVN decision to increase MONRE responsibilities for maritime issues.

POLLUTION HISTORY  
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¶3. (SBU) From January through June, Vietnam suffered four separate waves of marine oil pollution incidents with each wave impacting a different geographical region, from Haiphong in the north to Ca Mau in the far south. Each wave consisted of thick and wide sheens of crude oil washing up along the shore and impacted tourist beaches, a sea turtle sanctuary and commercial fisheries (ref A). The GVN estimated that the pollution incidents resulted in nearly 2,000 tons of oil and contaminated sand. GVN officials noted that they had heard anecdotally that other Southeast Asian nations also had encountered similar marine oil pollution, but had no firm details.

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?  
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14. (SBU) According to GVN analyses, the slicks consisted primarily of crude oil, with very small amounts of commercial oil, possibly from passing ships. The unique characteristics of the oil, including low paraffin and sulfur content, indicated that it originated in Southeast Asia or China. However, Ha stated that the GVN lacked access to international databases in order to match its samples to suspected sources. (Note: Per ref B, industry contacts earlier commented that state-owned PetroVietnam, a well-connected oil-tanker cleaning service, or tankers emptying their bilges while traversing Vietnamese waters could be the source(s) of at least some of the discharges and that the GVN had the capacity to determine the origin of the oil slicks.)

#### PREVIOUS REQUESTS FOR ASSISTANCE

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15. (SBU) Beginning in March, several GVN agencies began to request USG assistance, culminating in an August diplomatic note from the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington to the State Department requesting "full cooperation ... in research activities, information sharing, and assistance in dealing with environmental problems." Earlier the Ministry of Defense had approached the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) for assistance but had not responded to repeated DOD attempts to provide detection and response support. Other GVN agencies had also made appeals to the U.S. National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) for technical assistance similar to the USAID-funded oil spill contingency planning activity conducted 2002-2005 in partnership with Vung Tau Province and PetroVietnam.

#### WHAT VIETNAM WANTS

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16. (SBU) Ha asserted that she would be the GVN point of contact for all marine pollution assistance requests. The GVN would like to better prepare for future incidents and create a legal and

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regulatory regime to better control and deter oil pollution. Ha clarified that the August diplomatic note sought assistance targeted to marine oil pollution and not broader environmental issues (though the GVN hoped that oil pollution assistance would lead to greater cooperation on maritime environmental issues generally). Specific requests, which Ha agreed to detail in one document approved by the oil spill working group, included greater access to real-time continuous remote imagery, assistance in matching oil pollution samples to samples in international databases, and response training. Ha stated that Vietnam would share its oil samples and analyses if the U.S. agreed to provide technical assistance. Additionally, Vietnam lacks the capacity to determine the environmental and economic costs of marine oil pollution, which it would use to seek restitution from the source(s) of the discharges.

#### COMMENT: GVN SEEKING FOCUS

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17. (SBU) While the recent formation of the inter-agency oil pollution working group indicates a desire to better coordinate efforts in this area, we are not as certain of the GVN resolve to find the source of the oil pollution -- particularly given the possibility of PetroVietnam's culpability. Additionally, despite Ha's claims, it remains unclear whether she actually will function as the one POC for the USG on this issue. We do believe that the GVN wants to improve its ability to respond to oil pollution and strengthen the related regulatory regime. The severe, mysterious marine oil pollution incidents have caused tremendous environmental and economic damage, particularly in the fisheries and tourism sectors. If the GVN can better focus its requests for assistance, we recommend that U.S. agencies provide available resources and expertise.

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